

Maintenance is high priority

By Nick Sabatini

Three days ago, a USA TODAY story said:

"Federal accident investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board say they've seen nothing to indicate a growing problem with maintenance."

We agree.

The fact of the matter is that aviation is still the safest way to go. The world's foremost statistician on aviation safety, Arnold Barnett, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, put it this way: A passenger would have to choose one flight at random each day for 21,000 years before succumbing to a fatal crash. The actual number is 0.024 accidents per 100,000 departures. To be sure, 0.001 is too many. But in reality, 0.024 is a safety record we only could dream about on our roads.

This outstanding record is a tribute to everyone in aviation — airlines, manufacturers, labor, academia, government and more. It's testimony to what this community can achieve when it comes together. But as good as this record is, we've got to make it better.

In the safety business, you can't rest on achievement. You always must look for the next way — the smarter way — to lower the rate of accidents. And that is exactly what we're doing by sharpening our focus on airline maintenance.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) relies on 3,200 inspectors to ensure that airlines and repair and maintenance facilities meet their safety obligations. During the past few years, we have trained our inspectors to work smarter in response to industry changes. We continue to emphasize risk assessment and trend analysis to identify lapses. This approach targets our surveillance to the areas where it will produce the greatest safety benefit.

Staying out in front — prevention — is still the best way to stop an accident.

We're focusing on repair stations and enhancing new oversight programs for stations that perform outsourced maintenance work. In January, we implemented sweeping revisions to repair station rules. This gives us more surveillance authority and tougher standards for contract maintenance and mandates FAA-approved training programs for workers.

We will stay focused on making air travel even safer. The U.S. long has been the leader in aviation. We intend to keep it that way.

Nick Sabatini, a pilot, is the associate administrator in charge of the Federal Aviation Administration 's safety regulations office.